EDITH KERN

Presidential Address 1977
Resolved: That the Proper Study of Mankind Is Man*

IT HAS always been exciting for me to come to an MLA Convention in Chicago, for one is at once aware of the extraordinary vitality of the city. Although it modestly calls itself "the second city," its fierce winter winds and snow storms have never prevented architects in thought and stone from dreaming their most daring dreams within its bounds, or airlines from making O'Hare their busiest port. Chicago has been and always will be, I believe, a monument to this country's physical and cultural inexhaustibility. But the exhilaration I have usually felt as a visitor to Chicago is considerably impaired this year by the sad fact that Illinois is among the small number of states (fifteen in all) that have not yet passed the Equal Rights Amendment—a fact so perturbing to the men and women of this association that they seriously considered holding the convention elsewhere this year and desisted from such a change of plans only because too many organizational commitments had been made before Illinois's recalcitrance had become evident. The Modern Language Association is, as we all know, a professional and scholarly, not a political, organization, but equality of rights and opportunities is at the heart of the humanities we profess. One can only hope that Illinois's failure will remain no more than a temporary lapse and that, in the future, we shall have no need to forego meetings in one of the country's truly important places.

Having said this, I may sound contradictory when—echoing Pope's *Essay on Man*—I announce the title of my address as "Resolved: That the Proper Study of Mankind Is Man." Let me assure you, at once, therefore, that in this context I use the word "man" to represent *both sexes*. It is meant to be used metynomically, in the way the word "crystal" may be used both to designate all crystallized matter and more specifically to designate a glass from which I drink or another wherein I can see my image. The word "man" is meant here to be the equivalent of "humankind," whose proper study, I should like to maintain, is the humanities, the languages and literatures, the very subjects that, unfortunately, many contemporary administrators of educational institutions look upon as expendable luxuries, as unnecessary in the preparation for "life and success." Much has been said and yet more must be said about this surprising and arbitrary division of knowledge. It is particularly astonishing that so misleading an emphasis could have come about at this point in Western intellectual history, when some of the greatest scientists and thinkers are more than ever aware of the structural unity of all knowledge, when we recognize language as that which distinguishes man, and man alone, from all other living creatures, and when we have come to realize, moreover, that man's understanding of this universe is as much conditioned by his language as his language is shaped by his experience.

It is in the light of such thinking that I have been at times intrigued, at others amused or perturbed, by an impressive poster upon which my eyes inadvertently come to rest whenever I take the suburban train to the university where I teach. The poster advertises *Forbes* magazine, a publication—which, I must admit, I have never read—that addresses itself decidedly to the business world. The poster is dominated by the head and shoulders of a heavy-set middle-aged man, partly bald, relaxed, rather smug, wearing glasses, and holding a cigar: the figure of a successful businessman. He seems unaware that there is behind him a much smaller, more agile, and younger man who has climbed up on something high enough to enable him to rest one hand on the older man's shoulder and to peer down into the businessman's head through oversized binoculars that he holds in his other

hand. The sense of threat and aggression conveyed by this attitude is further stressed by the facts that the young man's head is above that of his object of observation and that the instrument is huge in proportion to the young man's size, though it corresponds to the dimensions of the head at which it is directed. Yet, upon closer view, the instrument proves to be not at all the binoculars it pretends to be. It is made, not of steel and polished glass, but rather of two copies of the magazine the poster advertises, rolled up to simulate the tubes of such a tool. This visual metaphor would be almost poetic were it not for the poster's threatening legend: "It's like reading your boss's mind. The man whose job you're after reads *Forbes*. Capitalist tool." In conjunction with the picture, this odd syntax seems to mean that an ambitious young man, by availing himself of the information *Forbes* supplies, can preset or program his mind in computerlike fashion to make it correspond to that of his superior, and thus can ultimately replace his unsuspecting boss. Already he has climbed to heights from which he can look down upon him whose job he's after. Only time seems needed to bring about the boss's eclipse.

But how is one to understand the term "capitalist tool"? Is *Forbes* advocating a way of life in which the man who has "arrived" is fated to be overcome and annihilated by one who has not yet succeeded but who is ready to use sharper tools in order to do so, only to be defeated in turn, most likely, by yet another, using still finer instruments? Is the poster to glorify or satirize a world of capitalism so brutal that victory depends upon another's defeat and dog eats dog in unending repetition? Is *Forbes* hailed as supplying the weapons for this unholy war? Or are we meant to see the little man as the underdog who —in a fantasy triumph and with the help of *Forbes*—outwits the establishment with the very tools capitalism created? In this sense, the poster's deep structure would be akin to that of farce and might induce us to laugh at the older man in the manner in which we laugh, for instance, at Molière's Arnolphe, the middle-aged protagonist of the playwright's *Ecole des femmes*, who, without realizing it, supplies his young rival in love with all the tools youth needs in order to outwit powerful pillars of society, in this case his own pompous self. Or does the poster solicit our compassion for this older man, so trusting and unsuspecting and yet so fatally preyed upon that even his thoughts are no longer private behind the seemingly thick walls of his skull but, rather, are threatened by the magazine, that "capitalist tool" which he had trusted as his mentor? Whatever the advertiser's intention, our reaction will depend on the way in which we interpret the poster, and may determine whether or not we subscribe to *Forbes*.

But while these are questions of concern to the advertiser interested in new customers or subscribers—questions, incidentally, upon which the humanities are able to throw much light—what strikes the humanist above all is that the poster, in spite of its exclusively capitalist concerns, testifies to the advertiser's belief in the power of the Word: the word recorded on the picture and that contained in the magazine it advertises. For the rolled-up copies of a magazine can serve as a tool only if, like binoculars, they scan the capitalist world and reveal and name it. In creating the pictorial metaphor, the advertiser thus expressed unwittingly what mankind has felt from time immemorial and what is implicit in all myths of creation: namely, that creation, existence, and naming are inseparable and that they are the province of gods and priests and, finally, mankind. We know that to Heraclitus it was the Word that made visible and audible the laws of the universe. If language did not disclose them, they remained veiled within the cosmos that contained them. In the *Rigveda*, Ernst Cassirer informs us,

> the commander of the word is equated with the soma, the all-nourishing force, and designated as "he who governs all things with power." For at the base of the human word which comes into being and passes away, lies the eternal, imperishable word, the celestial Vâc. "I go," says this heavenly Discourse in a hymn, "with the Rudras, with the Vasus, I go with the Adityas and the All-gods. . . . I am the queen, the assembler of treasures, the wise, the first of the worshipful ones. In manifold places did the Gods divide me, who dwell in many abodes, causing me to penetrate many regions. Through me he eats food who perceives, who breathes, who hears what is spoken. . . . I blow forth even as the wind, reaching all beings, beyond heaven, beyond earth."

Such sentiments have found almost equally strong expression in contemporary writings, although now it is no longer God or the gods but clearly man, the "language animal," who is the sole possessor of language. "I am," proclaims Beckett's Unnamable, "whether I am words among words or silence in the midst of silence." He also says, "I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling all words, the whole world is there with me, I'm air, the walls, the walled-in one, everything yields, opens, ebbs, flows, like flakes, I'm all these flakes, meeting, mingling, falling asunder, wherever I go I find me, leave me, go toward me, come from me, nothing ever but me, a particle of me, retrieved, lost, gone astray. I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling, no sky for their dispersing, coming together to say, fleeing one another to say, that I am they, all of them . . . and nothing else, yes, something else, that I'm something quite different, a quite different thing, a wordless thing in an empty place." Certainly it would seem inappropriate to compare Beckett's poetry, so filled with the author's philosophical questioning of the relation between existence and language, to a poster aiming at immediate usefulness. Yet, underneath it all, both pay homage to the same power. And Sartre might well be placed between the two when, in his *What Is Literature?*, he proclaims that speaking and writing are forms of action and calls our attention to a moment in Stendhal's *Chartreuse de Parme* where a third character fears, not the encounter of two potential lovers, but the possibility that the word "love" might come up between them. While love is a possibility, it does not truly exist until it has been named.

But if we may be so bold as to assert that the *Forbes* poster, by its very existence, proclaims the advertiser's belief in the power of the Word, we must also recognize that it ignores—and probably to its detriment—the equally ancient and ubiquitous fear that naming limits things or persons by labeling them, often distorting and solidifying that which it identifies. It is obvious that taboos associated with pronouncing the name of God or using his name in vain sprang from such fears. It is equally obvious that the change of name that, in medieval epics and romances, accompanies crucial changes in the status or attitude of the hero originates in such thinking. Hence, after his first successful battle, Rodriguez becomes El Cid, in the Spanish poem by that name; the nobleman of La Mancha becomes Don Quixote, once he has been knighted, in Cervantes' novel. In a similar manner the protagonists of Beckett's trilogy assume new names at each stage of their development toward more advanced bodilessness and more accomplished authorship: Moran becomes Molly; Molly seems to be dying as Malone; Malone, on his deathbed, tells the story of MacMann (son of man), who in the *Unnamable* becomes Mahood (mankind). Sartre's entire play *Huis-clos* is a dramatization of the hellish effect that naming, in the sense of labeling, may have upon the individual not authentic enough to preserve his right to assuming his own *possibles*. When labeled by the Other, man is turned into an object and condemned to hell, whether he is dead or seemingly alive in a living room. It is one of the paradoxes of language that man both desires and fears its power: he needs it to order the universe and disclose cosmic laws but fears it for the deception and distortion it might bring about. Again it is Beckett who has given haunting expression to both namelessness and a world too foully named: "And even my sense of identity," Molloy laments,

> was wrapped in namelessness often hard to penetrate. . . . Yes, even then when already all was fading, waves and particles, there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names. I say that now, but after all what do I know now about then, now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named. All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle, and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead.

Yet Molloy's complaint about the world that is foully named reflects not only a concern with the freezing of live reality that all naming implies but also his author's affinity with the Vichian beliefs that language was purer in its origins, when it was closer to poetry, and that it is society that has deprived it of its concreteness, turning

it into pale abstraction. By using such clichés as "the man whose job you're after," "your boss," and "capitalist tool," the *Forbes* poster not only delimits the audience it addresses, not only confers icy meanings upon itself and the world, but also gives vivid proof of the extent to which language stems from—and, in turn, affects—its cultural climate.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the great German philologist, believed that

> Man lives with his objects chiefly—in fact, since his feeling and acting depend on his perception, one may say exclusively—as language presents them to him. By the same process whereby he spins language out of his own being, he ensnares himself in it; and each language draws a magic circle round the people to which it belongs, a circle from which there is no escape save by stepping out of it into another.

Humboldt's observations are confirmed to the fullest extent by recent thinkers. Benjamin Lee Whorf, for example, in his study of the Hopi Indians of the American Southwest, wrote:

> The forms of a person's thought are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematisations of his own language—shown readily enough by a candid comparison and contrast with other languages, especially those of a different linguistic family. His thinking itself is in a language —in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese. And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship or phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.

Heidegger, believing that truth is concealed at the very ground of Being, was induced by this belief to search for such truth in language, an essential part of Being. To him, the German term *Dasein* came to represent the truth of human existence and man's relationship to Being. Although *Dasein* literally means simply "being there" and normally refers to anything that exists, Heidegger used it exclusively to designate the existence of man. As he dissected the word into its two components: *da* 'here and now' and *Sein* 'Being,' it appeared to him that the *da* was identical with man because man alone is capable of localizing timeless Being and making it historical. It is man's intelligence that thrusts its light upon Being and differentiates it, so that all that is can come to light. Man as *Dasein* thus became for the philosopher the "here and now of Being." Thereby, while dwelling in the house of language, man became as well the guardian of language, which is obviously a part of Being. Heidegger considered man truly human only when he is closest to Being, that is, when he is the poet, the writer, the witness and guardian of that part of Being which is presented by language; and *he* should be called a humanist who is the most faithful guardian of Being, its most perceptive "here and now," the most acute and the brightest *da* of *Sein*.

Heidegger's search for the pristine origins of language led him to ways of discovering meanings in linguistic forms that more traditional philologists condemn as logically and historically indefensible. Many of you are familiar with the fascinating international battle of wits that was unleashed in the forties and fifties when Heidegger applied his method to the line of a poem by Mörike, "Auf eine Lampe," that had just been given a new interpretation by Staiger in the Swiss publication *Trivium*. Spitzer, writing in the same periodical, accused the philosopher of a disregard for philological laws. Yet Heidegger's faulty etymology (Derrida would call it today his "deconstruction of language") managed to withstand the onslaught of Spitzer's decidedly superior knowledge of philology and linguistics. A striking example of the seductively creative games the philosopher has played with language, in his effort to save us from the blindness to which sheer habit condemns us, is his discussion of the word *Vermögen*, which might be translated as "might" or "power." As with *Dasein*, Heidegger divided the word into two parts: its prefix *ver-* (which by itself has no meaning but may alter the meaning of verbs to which it is attached) and the word's root or, as he calls it, the essence, *mögen*, which, as a verb, roughly corresponds to the English "can"—the ability to do something—as well as to the English "may" or "might," the latter not only as a verb but also as the noun meaning "power." A more recent meaning of *mögen* is "to like." Fusing this

recent meaning with the more ancient one, Heidegger inferred that our *liking* of something imbues us with the *power* of understanding it. For all its explicit seriousness, such thinking has an implicit playfulness, which stamps man as *homo ludens* and which has always been a privilege assumed by great manipulators of language —by poets and writers.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find a similar approach to language in the works of some of our most brilliant modern writers. I shall briefly refer here to James Joyce and Beckett—not because I wish to claim that they were influenced by Heidegger but, on the contrary, because their acknowledgment of Vico as their source of inspiration seems to be added proof of the persistent presence of synchronic/diachronic structures in our intellectual history. Heidegger shares with Vico the belief in "a common mental language" and "a common ground of truth," which, in Vico's view, explains why uniform ideas originate among entire peoples unknown to one another. In adopting this Vichian notion, Joyce attempted to uncover within words their often forgotten meanings and frequently did so with the help of non-English languages. In 1929, writing in defense of *Finnegans Wake*, which was then still referred to as "Work in Progress," Beckett acknowledged Joyce's debt to Vico and explained that the author, finding the word "doubt" "abstracted to death" and no longer sufficiently expressive of the hesitancy and uncertainty inherent in its Latin etymon or its German equivalent, *Zweifel*, replaced it with "in twosome twiminds." I should also like to mention here one of the most striking examples of Joyce's fusion of two languages—another method, both serious and playful, by which he enriched language. In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce wrote: "equals of opposites, evolved by a onesame power of nature or of spirit, *iste*, as the sole condition and means of its himundher manifestation and polarised for reunion by the symphesis of their antipathies." It would take too long to analyze even this part of a much longer sentence, but you will have recognized it as a linguistic telescoping of Vico's entire philosophy: the belief in the common ground of truth, which is referred to here as "the onesame power of nature or of spirit"; the opposites wherein this power manifests itself, represented here by "him" and "her"; and the synthesis of the two, suggested by Joyce's neologism "symphesis." But the writer added to all this still another dimension by replacing the particle "and" in the English phrase "him and her" with its German equivalent, *und*. This evokes the German phrase *hin und her* (back and forth), which suggests a pendulum movement. The entire passage, through its return to the ground, the origin of words, thus shows language in action on various levels, those of poetry, of thought, of play, while revealing unity underneath diversity.

Beckett has put the Vichian inspiration to use in different ways. His fusions of one language with another are more elusive than those of Joyce. To suggest their nature, I shall restrict myself here to two examples. Most of you will remember the author's play *Waiting for Godot*, which established his fame. The name Godot is, obviously, a composite of the English *God* and the French suffix *-ot*, which has pejorative connotations, as in Pierre/Pierrot, Jacques/Jacquot. Moreover, at the beginning of that play's second act, one of the two main characters, Vladimir, sings a song whose German original is a favorite of children because it never ends. You may remember it:

> A dog came in the kitchen
> And stole a crust of bread.
> Then cook up with a ladle
> And beat him till he was dead.
> Then all the dogs came running
> And dug the dog a tomb
> And wrote upon the tombstone
> For the eyes of dogs to come:
> A dog came in the kitchen . . .

Here, then, the song begins again, and in its unending circularity, it evokes not only children at play and thus the aimless playfulness of existence but also the essentials of Vichian philosophy, which Beckett describes in his essay on *Finnegans Wake* as an "emphasis on the tangible conveniences common to Humanity" and "the inevitable character of every progression—or retrogression," namely, that which Joyce conjured up in his own words as "the Vico road goes round and round to meet where terms begin." The song epitomizes the spirit that seems to give form to Beckett's entire work: it reveals its structure.

It may well be that Joyce and Beckett were able to use language in such extraordinary ways because they had intensively studied a number of languages other than their own. They both achieved what Heidegger has called ec-sistence (not *ex* but *ec*), that standing outside or beside himself which man needs in order to gain insight into Being. Humboldt, as you will remember, speaks of the magic circle that language draws "round the people to which it belongs, a circle from which there is no escape save by stepping out of it into another." Whorf tells us that the intricate systematizations of our own language become visible to us only through comparison and contrast with other languages. When Vico, in his *New Science*, criticized the philosophers of his day for being more concerned with nature, which they could not hope to understand, since it could be comprehensible only to God, who had made it, than with "the study of the world of nations, which, since man made it, man can truly know," he believed this "aberration" to be "a consequence of that infirmity of the human mind, by which, immersed and buried in the body, it naturally inclines to take notice of bodily things, and finds the effort to attend to itself too laborious, just as the bodily eye sees all objects outside itself but needs a mirror to see itself." No better argument could be made, I believe, for the importance of the study of the humanities, that is, the study of languages and literatures, which alone leads us to the proper study of man and which—granted the need for a publisher to sell his magazines—would remind us that there is more to life than reading the mind of the man whose job we're after.

But I cannot, I must admit, return to the *Forbes* poster without remembering a remarkable study, made by one of my most inspiring former teachers, of another advertisement. I am referring to Leo Spitzer's essay "American Advertising Explained by Popular Art." As a humanist eminently capable of stepping outside his cultural cocoon, Spitzer could clearly recognize the advertisement's underlying structures and become aware of their adherence to the same laws that have governed art throughout the ages. This is how Spitzer describes the poster:

> In the drugstores throughout our country, the brand of oranges known as *Sunkist* was advertised some years ago by the following picture-with-text: on a high mountain range, covered with snow that glistens in the bright sunshine, furrowed by vertical gullies, towering over a white village with its neat, straight rows of orange trees, there rests a huge orange-colored sun, inscribed with the word "Sunkist." In front of this vista, set squarely in the midst of the groves, is a glass of orange juice which rises to the exact height of the mountain range and whose color exactly matches that of the sunball. Next to this gigantic glass of juice is a smaller one of the same color, and next to that, a fruit-squeezer on which lies the orange to be squeezed. In the left corner of the advertisement we read as the only inscription:
>
> "From the sunkist groves of California
> Fresh for you."

Spitzer believed that "the elimination of man from this pictorial representation, the concentration on productive Nature and on the miracle of the final appearance of the juice, as we have it before us in our drugstores, represents a highly poetic procedure," because it also eliminates all causality and, thereby, evokes a moment of beauty and dream, which seems to deny altogether the advertisement's commercial aims. The disproportion in size of sun, mountains, and the two glasses of orange juice corresponds, in fact, to that of medieval pictorial representations that—governed by laws of prescientific perspective—show the figure of Christ or of a king in dimensions larger than those of ordinary men. Spitzer concludes, therefore, that even the world of business is subject to laws of poetry and art that maintain themselves even in the face of all the technical developments of the modern world. The lifeless product of the orange tree seems to sing the praises of nature in much the same way as the wood of the violin had been felt to sing that of the voiceless tree: "Arbor viva, tacui; mortua, cano." The orange color, shared by the different-sized glasses of orange juice, the Sunkist orange, and the sun bearing the inscription "Sunkist," represents in its unifying function another structural analogue to medieval representations. The fruit seems, moreover, as central to this advertisement as it is in the story of the biblical Fall. Like the biblical apple, the orange in this poster is made part of an Edenic setting, a paradise of natural harmony, and it is not surprising, therefore, that Spitzer is reminded of the

fourfold representation of the fruit on an eleventh-century portal of the Hildesheim cathedral. In this relief, Eve is shown to hold an apple, Adam holds another, a third is in the mouth of a dragon that appears in one of the trees, and a fourth is formed by Eve's breast. Yet, if such structural analogies can be discovered in present-day American posters and in ancient religious art in Europe, they reveal not only what is universal but also, through contrast, how patterns are transformed. For, in the story of the Fall, the fruit is a temptation to forbidden pleasure, whereas in the Sunkist poster it tempts us with the promise of legitimate enjoyment. There can be no doubt that this difference in meaning comes about through a dialectic relationship between what was meant to be presented and what the beholder's cocoon enables him to see.

Spitzer's awareness of underlying structures, revealing both analogies and contrasts, was heightened, undoubtedly, because he had had to step out of his own cultural and linguistic net. Like such scholars as Auerbach and Wellek, he could not but be a comparatist. One might say that he was a "structuralist" before the term became part of a critical labyrinth so intricate and impenetrable that it might well make us forget that the quest for structures today transcends specific personalities and that the intellectual climate it represents is still shared even by those critics who now speak of "deconstruction" and "grammatology." Spitzer was, above all, a humanist and dwelt in the "house of language," guarding it in a way that cannot but strengthen our awareness of its central function in our Faustian desire to know "the inmost force that bonds the universe." Whether we today call ourselves humanists, natural or social scientists, or, more specifically, linguists, anthropologists, molecular biologists, physicists, or psychologists (to mention but a few of the specialized labels); whether we believe with Kant that man has an a priori knowledge of his universe and with Chomsky that there is a universal grammar and that man's mind, not unlike a computer, is preset and programmed to detect the structures of this universe; whether we think of man as *homo significans*, who imposes the structures of his mind upon the world so as to make it meaningful; or whether we believe that we stand in a dialectical relationship to all that is and both derive and convey meaning—we alone, as human beings, can discover and reveal those underlying structures that give evidence of the unity of all knowledge proclaimed by Vico. As "language animals" we are central in any quest for knowledge, and so must we be in the study of mankind.

Hofstra University
Hempstead, New York

Note

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